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## Political geography in childhood

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A brief overview of the recent volumes of *Political Geography* reveals that even if children are not among the most common research foci, they are not totally absent in political geography either. Under-age people are recognized as agents in politically significant events, as implicated in geopolitical conflicts, as objects of policy making, and as empowered participants in civic activities and political practices (e.g. Jones 2004; Campbell 2007; Hörschelmann 2008; Hammett 2008; Ó Tuathail 2009). Given the importance of children in the building of future societies this interest is to be applauded. However, key conceptual issues pertaining to the spatial politics of childhood remain unresolved. These include the very meanings of ‘children’s politics’ and ‘children’s political agency’.

In the current literature children are typically portrayed as influenced by, objects of, or involved in politics, but what is meant by ‘the political’ is often left unspecified. Hence, the concept is either taken for granted, or its meaning is derived from events and topics readily known (by adults) to have political significance (e.g. wars and conflicts, poverty, drugs abuse, migration, child labor). This observation holds for the examination of formal ‘Politics’ (e.g. Matthews & Limb 2003; Skelton 2007), mundane everyday life ‘politics’ (e.g. Habashi 2008; Skelton 2009), as well as forms of political socialization (e.g. Claes *et al.* 2009). In consequence, the political geographies of children, *their* politics emerging in the specific contexts of childhood, remain marginally discussed and known (cf. Katz 2004; Kjørholt 2007). More work is needed to clarify the concept of politics as it regards children, and to empirically locate political geographies *in* childhood.

Engaging with the task may feel unsettling because it raises the fundamental question of what is 'the political' in political geography. Yet the question is unavoidable if we take seriously Hannah Arendt's (1958) conviction that we need to move away from abstract theories in favor of examining political action as it happens in the world. What, indeed, are children, politics and children's politics? We can not define children or childhood on the basis of age because a 'child' is not the same everywhere. Childhood may be universal as a phenomenon but the position of a child is formed in relation to culturally and geographically specific institutions, traditions and forms of family life. Obviously this has implications to what children's politics can be in different parts of the world.

Do all children practice politics, then, and if they do, by what means – what does the political as a 'human condition' mean to children? Carl Schmitt's broad definition of politics as struggle between friends and enemies provides some conceptual tools for discussing the issue, but when applied to children we must accept that we often do not know beforehand what these struggles are about, where they take place and who the participants are. Thus the critical question is: Who and what settles these roles? Does children's action, a childhood event, or a certain issue significant to children turn political due to its societal relevance, its scale, its implications for children's well-being, the intentions of the child, or some other reason?

These questions are difficult because they upset the idea that we know what politics is before studying it (cf. Rancière 1992; Dean 2000; Dikeç 2005). Moreover, they are posed in the context of childhood where the meanings of politics are not nearly as clear as in the adult world. Children differ from adults as political actors in two partly related ways. First, children are not autonomous members of society and, by definition, cannot be made ones. They can be empowered by participatory practices and heard in matters of their concern but not held

responsible and liable for themselves. Children typically fail to measure up to adults' and institutional actors' rational argumentation and thus by necessity practice politics on other, often bodily, grounds (Kallio 2008; Thomas 2009). Secondly, at the same time children are human beings thoroughly involved in meaning-making processes and identity construction, living their lives as actual members of institutions, communities and societies (James & Prout 1997; Alderson 2008). This twofold position, resulting in a rather particular standpoint, forms the basis of children's politics.

The grounds, means, meanings and interests of children's politics situate in and derive from lived and experienced childhoods, which vary from place to place. This, of course, does not mean that children's politics is unrelated to adults' concerns or other political forces – quite the contrary. Processes of socialization inevitably bind these social worlds together. Children make adults agents in their everyday politics just as authorities, shopkeepers, professionals, warlords, institutional actors, and adult community and family members draw children into theirs. But what it does entail is that the study of children's politics and political geographies must begin from discovering what politics means to those practicing it.

If 'the political' in childhood is vaguely conceptualized, children's politics can not be distinguished from personal behavior or general social agency. Politics then becomes an empty notion. To enliven the concept of children's politics we propose that it be reserved specifically to those situations where children as *intentional* social beings relate to subject positions offered by parental, (peer) cultural or institutional forces of socialization. These positions may be individual or collective but they do not determine the outcome of children's politics because processes of socialization are culturally specific and open-ended. Hence, deviating from a traditional (rationalist) understanding of politics as interest-driven agency we

deem it necessary to include forms of intentional agency that are pre-reflexive and/or embedded in identity formation. Only as *someone* may children have interest in *something* (cf. Ringmar 1996). Children's politics may be oppositional but it is crucial to acknowledge that conformism may be an equally successful political tactic.

What kinds of political geographies, then, will unfold from these starting points? More awareness of what children's lived and experienced politics are like seems an obvious outcome. Bringing together insights from critical childhood studies and political geography opens an avenue for the analysis of, for example, the political means that children use for coping with challenging socio-cultural contexts and social changes (e.g. geopolitical conflicts, migration, transformation of urban spaces, changing family relations); power relations among children (e.g. in school that simultaneously is a peer cultural arena and an institutional setting); and children's politics related to challenging, negotiating, controlling, carving and creating spaces to serve their own ends (e.g. virtual communities, institutional liminalities, abandoned public areas, the body as a contested space). Contrary to how children are commonly approached in political geography, in this view children are not considered as objects of or subjects in adult politics, but as competent and skillful agents who practice their own politics. To adults involved in these struggles as 'friends' or 'enemies', children's politics are familiar enough: They are the bread and butter of daily life in homes, schools, streets, kindergartens, public spaces, sweatshops, welfare clinics – political encounters often dismissed as mere good or bad behavior.

Children's politics take many forms and follow different kinds of tactics (Kallio 2007). When mobilized as direct resistance to adult authority they are highly visible, but less conflicting forms of politicking typically remain unrecognized. Yet the latter are often more empowering

for the child than open confrontation. For instance, by taking dutifully care of tasks assigned to them (work, homework, babysitting or other given duties) children may gain free time much more effectively than by defying their home-coming hours or shirking from work.

Importantly, the reverberations of children's politics reach well beyond their immediate contexts. Many institutional practices and policies have to accommodate the politics of those children who do not follow 'good conduct'. For example, when children employ the street as a substitute to playground, or home, urban policies regarding the use of public spaces may need to be revised to accommodate this agency. Children's politics may reconfigure social power relations also by redirecting cultural practices. A case in point is the adoption of vegan identity by an increasing number of children and youth, which has built pressures for schools to provide more meat-free meals and thus also reduce their carbon footprint. Locating such political geographies *in* childhood would provide new tools for understanding children's political roles.

Secondly, and more generally, the study of children's politics will contribute to an enlivened political geography that is able to recognize and discover politics in extraordinary and unexpected places and situations. Rather than contradicting with other existing understandings of politics, this approach helps to identify and study events, acts and contexts that in political analysis are easily bypassed as apolitical. Approaching childhood and children this way, not as exotic issues marginal to political geography but as "critical cases" within it, yields conceptual tools that facilitate theoretical work on the limits and borders of politics also more generally (cf. Flyvbjerg 2001). Defining the child as a critical case of the modern political subject permits the following proposition: If it is possible to address what politics means in the case of children, and to demonstrate how children's political agency unfolds in

childhood, it is possible to locate the political aspect in any context or identify it in any modern subject's action.

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